

Thursday, December 25, 2003

Spokane

Brian Murray to replace West in Senate

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Legislative aide Brian Murray will take over for his boss, Jim West, in the state Senate next month, but will have to win two elections next year to keep the job.

Spokane County commissioners appointed Murray Wednesday to the vacancy created when West was elected mayor of Spokane.

Republican precinct officers in Spokane's 6th Legislative District put Murray at the top of a list of three names Monday when they met to nominate West's replacement.

But the No. 2 name on the list, state Rep. Brad Benson, said immediately after the appointment that he will challenge Murray for the Senate seat in 2004.

The third person on the list, Mark Richard, the legislative director for the Spokane Home Builders and the Spokane Realtors, said he'll run for Benson's House seat.

The commissioners described all three nominees as "exceptional candidates," and followed tradition by following the precinct officers' top nominee.

"If it had been anybody else (atop the list) that's who I would've went with," Commissioner Phil Harris told Murray after praising his qualifications.

Commissioner John Roskelley, the sole Democrat on the panel, said all three seemed focused on improving jobs and the local economy, which is an important local issue.

"I hope you will keep an open mind to the environment," Roskelley added.

Murray said one of his main issues will be finding ways to keep young adults in Spokane.

"We need to make sure, after they graduate from our schools, that they can stay here for good jobs," he said.

Murray is a member of the county's Conservation District Board and is working on a graduate degree from Gonzaga University in organizational leadership.

Along with running West's legislative office, he managed winning legislative races in 2000 and 2002, and West's recent mayoral campaign.

"Jim was always a good mentor," Murray said, adding the longtime senator taught him the value of always being open to good ideas.

Next fall, he'll have to campaign for himself, first in a primary that pits him against Benson, who has represented the same district in a House seat since 1997.

Benson said he was "a little disappointed" that he didn't receive the precinct officers' top slot. But he said he vowed to run for the seat in 2004 when he first got into the competition to replace West.

An election is a much different process, and will give him a chance to appeal to independents as well as Republicans.

"I'm not running against Brian, I'm running for the seat," he said. "The district needs the best representation they can get."

The winner of the GOP primary could face Laurie Dolan, the Democrat who challenged West in 2002 for what became the most expensive legislative race in state history.

Dolan has said she plans to run and has filed papers with the state Public Disclosure Commission. No other Democrats have announced plans to run in the district, which stretches west around the city core, from the Moran Prairie and South Hill to Indian Trails and the Whitworth area.